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Enacting creative calling when established career structures are not in place: The case of the Dutch video game industry

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ABSTRACT

Despite the long tradition of studies on calling conducted in established professional and occupational groups, little is known about what it means to enact one's calling in the context of less-established professions, absent career structures and temporary organizational settings. However, with the changing nature of work, this knowledge is highly needed to support independent workers. This paper presents a study of twenty-four founders of (video)game development companies in the Dutch video game industry who enact their calling in the context of poorly established career structures and scarce resources. Our findings reveal that the way the game company founders describe the meanings they attach to their work and to video game development suggests the presence of a creative calling, which focuses on the creative process rather than on a specific occupation or profession. The founders engage in emergent entrepreneurship and bond with like-minded people to create space that allows them to enact their creative calling in the video game industry. In doing so, they anchor their creative calling enactment in either an idealized or a crafted work identity. In turn, the choice of work identity anchor shapes how successful they are in sustaining this creative calling enactment in the video game industry. Our findings shed new light on the concept of calling and its enactment in the context of less-established career structures and scarce resources; they further provide practical implications for individuals who pursue their calling in contemporary work contexts and for career counselors.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen both the popular press and the academic literature paying much attention to the topic of finding and enacting one's calling (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Hirschi, 2011). Given that the origins of the calling concept are being inherently linked to a “specialized division of labor” (Weber, 1930, p. 109), the concept of calling has been persistently tied to a particular occupation or profession that an individual feels drawn to pursue, finds meaningful or sees as his or her purpose or duty in life (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Hall & Chandler, 2005). In this way, viewing one's career as a calling has been suggested to be a prerogative of individuals pursuing traditional professions, such as doctors (Bott et al., 2017), teachers (Serow, 1994), musicians (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012), priests (Conway, Clinton, Sturges, & Budjanovcanin, 2015), academics (Gazica & Spector, 2015) and pilots (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014).

However, as recent literature argues, scholars need to recognize that the nature of work and employment is changing (Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017). As a result, some professions disappear, and new forms of work emerge, forcing individuals to enact their

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calling professionally even in the absence of established career structures and guidelines. Furthermore, limited labor market possibilities, as well as a scarcity of the material resources (e.g., to finance a new project or to start up a firm) needed for the enactment of one's calling, suggest that enacting a calling in this context is much more challenging and that it requires individuals to be flexible and adaptable (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). Consequently, the changes in work and employment also challenge scholars to determine how to conceptualize and study calling, inviting a study of *how individuals experience, enact and sustain their calling in the context of less-established career structures and scarce resources*.

Prior research suggests that the absence of established career structures resembles a 'weak situation' in which individuals need to engage in career improvisation and enactment guided by their subjective (perceived) careers (Weick, 1996; Weick & Berlinger, 1989). Because a calling is often perceived to provide guidelines for the subjective career (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Khapova, Arthur, & Wilderom, 2007), it may be necessary to improvise around one's perceived calling in such contexts to create possibilities for enacting it. The inability of individuals to "live out their calling" could destroy potential career-related and well-being benefits that calling promises (Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, & Dik, 2016; Gazica & Spector, 2015). While research on creative industries points at the value of entrepreneurship as a useful tool for enacting one's calling in the challenging labor markets (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006; Lingo & Tepper, 2013), this research mostly studies creatives who represent traditional and recognized professions (i.e., actors, musicians, artists, etc.). While these creatives undoubtedly struggle to enact their calling in a labor market of limited job opportunities, they do enact their calling in a context with established career structures. Therefore, there is an urgency to explore how individuals in professions that are less established and societally recognized try to enact and sustain their calling.

To understand how individuals experience, enact and sustain their calling in the context of less-established career structures and limited resources, we engaged in a study of twenty-four founders of (video)game development companies of the Dutch video game industry. While the Dutch video game industry is a lucrative and growing market, it significantly lags behind the well-established North American, Asian, and Eastern European video game markets (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2013) and offers very limited career possibilities to pursue a calling in the industry. Indeed, media research points to the fact that the Dutch video game industry does not create enough job opportunities, and those employed in it experience job insecurity and work long hours (Nieborg, 2014). A recent study by Styhre, Szczepanska, and Remneland-Wikhamn (2018) also shows that individuals developing video games still fight to be taken seriously and to be seen as professionals because of the stigma attached to the video game industry. In this way, the Dutch video game industry represents a relevant and interesting setting for exploring how individuals experience, enact and sustain their calling in the context of less-developed career structures and scarce resources.

Our study reveals that founders of game companies describe their work as a *creative calling* that we defined as an enduring, compelling, and meaningful urge to engage in creative work (i.e., creation of video games) that delivers the best possible and most valuable experiences for other people. All of them share a love for games that originates in their childhood, which explains their choice of education as well as their decision to embark on an entrepreneurial path together with like-minded people to enact their creative calling in the video game industry. However, as they go about enacting their creative calling, the game company founders anchor this process in either an idealized or a crafted work identity, which shapes their attempts to sustain the enactment of their creative calling in the video game industry.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, the study shows that in a social context with poorly established career paths and limited employment opportunities, a calling can be experienced as focused on a creative process that goes beyond the boundaries of a specific occupation or profession. With this finding, the study challenges the established understanding of calling as being related exclusively to a particular occupation or profession (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011). It also responds to a recent call for a more 'flexible' understanding of the calling concept (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010). Second, our study shows that the enactment of the creative calling in the Dutch video game industry occurs through individual (i.e., emergent entrepreneurship) and collective (e.g., bonding with like-minded people) improvisation. This finding extends recent research on the process of living out one's calling (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Duffy & Autin, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016) and highlights its challenging nature (e.g., Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Dobrow Riza & Heller, 2015). Third, our study shows that anchoring the enactment of calling in an idealized versus crafted work identity may enable fewer opportunities for sustaining creative calling enactment in the context of less-established career structures and limited resources. Thus, it supports conceptual ideas about the importance of identity-related flexibility in calling enactment (Cardador & Caza, 2012) and extends the research examining conditions under which calling can influence one's career development in positive and/or negative ways (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018).

1.1. The nature of calling

Despite its deep religious roots, the concept of calling has received much attention from scholars in both sacred and secular contexts (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009). Given the diversity of research fields and disciplines showing a growing interest in calling, the definition of calling continues to be extensively debated. While scholars tend to agree that calling constitutes a meaningful/purposeful and often prosocial engagement in an occupation or profession, they have different conceptualizations of the source of one's calling – a 'transcendent summons', a sense of duty, or an inner drive (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Duffy, Allan, Bott, & Dik, 2014). Calling orientation has been differentiated from job and career orientation (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Viewing one's work as a calling suggests gaining great fulfillment from doing work that is perceived to make a valuable societal contribution. In contrast, viewing one's work as a job means that work is just a way to acquire resources to enjoy life away from work, and viewing work as a career means that work is a way to achieve

rewards and career advancement.

Despite the different conceptualizations of calling, scholars in the calling research field tend to see calling as being closely tied to a particular occupation or profession. We acknowledge that Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011) attempt to broaden the understanding of calling by defining it as “a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain” (p. 1001). Nevertheless, these domains still appear to be very much tied to a particular profession, such as a musician, a manager, or an artist. Furthermore, in their conceptual work, Elangovan et al. (2010) suggest that a calling, which is a “course of action in pursuit of prosocial intentions embodying the convergence of an individual's sense of what he or she would like to do, should do, and actually does” is “not necessarily bounded by occupations” but may be “spurred and directed by particular causes” (p. 430). In their study, Coulson, Oates, and Stoyles (2012) also point to the possibility that individuals experience calling in terms of their life role, such as the role of rearing a child.

Scholars suggest that experiences of calling are very closely linked to personal work identity (Berg et al., 2010; Hirschi, 2011). Individuals with a calling have a strong identification with their work or occupation (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), see their work as an integral part of themselves (Berg et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) and see it as one of the most important aspects of life (Hirschi, 2011). Moreover, a calling enables greater identity clarity with respect to personal values and life purpose (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Thus, individuals can rely on their calling as a guiding force in their career development.

Not only is work identity central to one's experiences of one's calling, but it may also interface with one's calling to shape one's experience of work (Cardador & Caza, 2012). Indeed, Cardador and Caza (2012) argue that work identity (i.e., “various meanings that a person attaches to himself or herself at work” (p. 345)) serves as a factor shaping a healthy versus unhealthy pursuit of one's calling with respect to one's relationships. The authors suggest that work identity flexibility (i.e., willingness and readiness to recognize work-related alternatives and adapt one's identity in response to challenges and life circumstances) explains the healthy versus the unhealthy pursuit of calling. In particular, when calling is coupled to a flexible work identity, it will facilitate positive and enriching relationships (i.e., the healthy calling pursuit), while when calling is coupled to a rigid work identity, it will contribute to negative and depleting relationships (i.e., the unhealthy calling pursuit) (Cardador & Caza, 2012). These ideas find support in the prior empirical research, which shows that when calling is coupled with a rigid view of oneself or of one's work or career, it has negative career-related implications for individuals. In particular, in these circumstances, individuals found themselves less able to adapt to a life-changing situation by abandoning their calling-infused identity and moving on (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014). They are less employable (Lysova et al., 2018), less aware of and willing to recognize the long-term risks and costs associated with pursuing the calling (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012), and less agentic in their career development (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015).

Because calling is often understood as being focused on a particular occupation or profession, it is important to understand how individuals experience, enact and sustain their calling in the context of less-established career structures and scarce resources.

2. Methods

Given that the focus of this study is on exploring the experiences of calling and of its enactment, we conducted a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013). Below, we provide a detailed description of our research setting, sample, data collection and analysis processes.

2.1. Research setting

We conducted this qualitative investigation in the Dutch video game industry, which served as a particularly theoretically relevant research setting that could illuminate the experiences associated with enacting one's calling in a context characterized by the absence of career structures and paths (Eisenhardt, 1989). Generally, the video game industry represents a unique setting where individuals are trying against all odds to make a living from their love and passion for games. To achieve this, they continuously improve their game development, practice their craft and showcase it (Weststar, 2015). The video game industry is characterized by project-based employment, where an iron triangle of resource constraints (budget, schedule, and scope) is the paramount driver in the lives of (video)game developers (Peticca-Harris, Weststar, & McKenna, 2015). This industry employs individuals who view their work as a ‘labor of love’, which is similar to how artists view their work (Menger, 1999; Røyseng, Mangset, & Borgen, 2007). However, unlike artists and other creatives (e.g., actors, etc.), who represent traditional and well-accepted professions, individuals developing video games still fight to be taken seriously and seen as professionals given the stigma attached to the video game industry (Styhre et al., 2018).

The Dutch video game industry is a fairly small industry with many micro- and small-sized game companies; only one Dutch video game company reaches approximately 200 employees (Kist & Kahlmann, 2016a; Koops et al., 2016). The development of the industry has been seen as promising, triggering the emergence of many educational programs that are focused on preparing professionals (i.e., game designers) for the industry. While the number of students and graduates is growing, the Dutch video game industry has failed to create enough job opportunities for them, resulting in a situation in which there are 1600 graduates annually for 60 available jobs (Kist & Kahlmann, 2016b). This points to the underdeveloped nature of the Dutch video game industry, especially with regard to the availability of opportunities and structures that support individuals in developing video games professionally. Moreover, the industry is characterized by long working days, little job security, and limited opportunities to receive subsidies and funding, which explains why in the Netherlands, working in the video game industry has the status of an ‘insecure dream job’ (Nieborg, 2014).

The Dutch video game industry is equally represented by a) game developing studios (i.e., game companies focused purely on the development of entertainment games on different platforms, e.g., console, mobile, online, and PC), and b) ‘serious’ or applied game studios (i.e., game companies focused on applying games and playful mechanics to solve problems in other industries, e.g.,

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of interviewees.

Founder	Age category	Education*	Company	Type	Founded	Size
1	25–29	Games, technology	A	GDS	2011	10
2	25–29	Games, technology				
3	25–29	Games, technology				
4	25–29	Software engineering	B	GDS	2013	1
5	35–39	Software engineering	C	GDS	2000	11
6	35–39	Software engineering	D	GDS	2013	7
7	35–39	Graphical engineering				
8	25–29	Game design				
9	25–29	Game design	F	GDS	2014	2
10	30–34	Game design	G	GDS	2014	2
11	30–34	Game design				
12	30–34	Animation				
13	25–29	Game design	H	GDS	2005	27
14	25–29	Game design	I	GDS	2007	15
15	25–29	Game design	J	GDS	2012	2
16	25–29	Game design	K	GDS	2011	4
17	25–29	Interaction design	L	GDS	2012	7
18	35–39	Interaction design				
19	35–39	Game design				
20	30–34	Game design	M	GDS	2013	1
21	30–34	Game design	N	SGS	2007	1
22	44–49	Interaction design	O	SGS	1997	35
23	44–49	Interaction design				
24	44–49	Interaction design				
25	35–39	Interaction design	P	SGS	2001	30
26	35–39	Interaction design	Q	SGS	1999	22
27	44–49	Technology				
28	44–49	Technology				

Note. GDS = game developing studio. SGS = serious game studio.

* To secure the anonymity of the interviewees, we report the main focus of their education rather than the exact title of the educational program.

healthcare, education) (Koops et al., 2016). We interviewed founders representing both types of game companies to account for potential differences between them. The game companies differed in tenure and size.

2.2. Data collection

We collected semi-structured interviews with twenty-four (video)game company founders, some of whom were part of the same game company. All of the interviewed founders were male. In terms of age, the majority of interviewed founders were younger than 34 years (62.5%). This is representative of the Dutch video game industry, in which 80% of employees are younger than 40 years old (Nieborg, 2014). In total, 79.17% of the interviewed game company founders graduated from a higher professional education (e.g., an Art school, etc.) and 20.83% of the founders – from a higher education (i.e., a research university). The interviews lasted 45–90 min. Two of the interviews were conducted with the two founders of one company at the same time, stimulating a reflective discussion between the two founders. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the interviewed founders.

The first set of questions aimed to understand respondents' thoughts, feelings and experiences related to their work, game development, and games in general. We started by asking the respondents to reflect on their role and responsibilities within their game company and the personal significance they attached their role and responsibilities. For example, we began all interviews with the following introductory question: “How would you describe your occupation and the work that you do in your company?” This allowed us to see how they identified themselves with regard to their work. After the introductory questions, similar to the procedure described in the article by Berg et al. (2010), we invited the respondents to read a few paragraphs describing the calling, career, and job orientations taken from the paper of Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) and to rate the extent to which each of those paragraphs captured their feelings about their current work on a scale from one (i.e., “not at all similar to me”) to seven (i.e., “very much similar to me”). However, because the categories were developed for employees working in organizations (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), we thought that the calling, career, and job orientation descriptions might have been understood differently by founders because they engage in both developing games and running a company. Therefore, we were less interested in the scores that they gave for each of the descriptions than in their explanation behind the ratings that they made. Prompting them to reflect on their feelings and thoughts with regard to their work in this way yielded rich explanations of the meanings founders attached to their work in the video game industry and of the reasons they worked in the industry. Then, we asked the respondents to share their stories about how they found their way into the video game industry. Answers to this question also contributed to a better understanding of what game development and work in the video game industry meant for the founders. Additional questions that were asked in relation to their stories were “what is so special about the work that you do?” and “how would your life look like without video game development?” In asking these questions, we inductively explored the calling of the game company founders. Thus, our interview questions did not include terms such as ‘passion’ or ‘calling’, which were discussed only when mentioned by the respondents.

The second set of questions aimed to elucidate the overall functioning of the game companies and the process of commercializing game development. In particular, we started with general questions about their game company, such as “What makes your company

special?” and “What does your company strive to be known for?” Next, we asked about the nature of the games that the company develops, the meaning behind them and the reasons for choosing them. These questions allowed us to capture how the founders seek to make an impact with games. We also asked the founders to reflect on the process of game creation and the process of turning the created game into a market product. All these questions were important to understand how the founders try to sustain their calling pursuit in the industry.

2.3. Data analysis

In the data analysis process, we followed an established inductive approach to analyzing qualitative data (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012), which included the three steps we describe below. The data analysis was in Atlas.ti, where we imported transcripts of the interviews and any additional publically available information facilitating a better understanding of the interviewees and the industry (e.g., LinkedIn, newspaper articles, etc.).

First, we started with an open coding of the collected data by creating (in-vivo) codes—that is, first-order codes originating from words and terms used by the founders of game companies or simple descriptive phrases (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Here we tried to discern codes across the game company founders that were similar in their essence, collapsing these codes into first-order concepts, offering general insights into the meanings the game company founders attached to their work and to game development as well as the meanings they attached to how they engaged in game development. The first-order concepts were formulated in a way that they as closely as possible reflected the statements that were shared by the interviewees themselves, without imposing our own interpretation on them.

In the second step of the data analysis, we explored the links that exist among the first-order concepts using axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When looking for the relationships within and between the first-order concepts, we searched for the ways to cluster these concepts into more general and abstract second-order themes. At this stage, we engaged in iterative dialogue between the data and the literature on calling, creative industries, identity, and entrepreneurship (Gioia et al., 2012) to make sense of our data and to inspire the development of the second-order themes. As a result, we clustered our first-order concepts into seven second-order themes. Fig. 1 describes our first-order concepts and how they form seven second-order themes that were distinguished during the data analysis.

In the final phase of the data analysis, we assembled the second-order themes into overarching aggregated dimensions to understand how the emerging themes could be linked. As a result, we aggregated the second-order themes into the following three dimensions – *experiencing creative calling*, *enacting creative calling in the video game industry*, and *sustaining creative calling enactment in the video game industry* – which served as the building blocks of our findings story. These aggregated dimensions became the

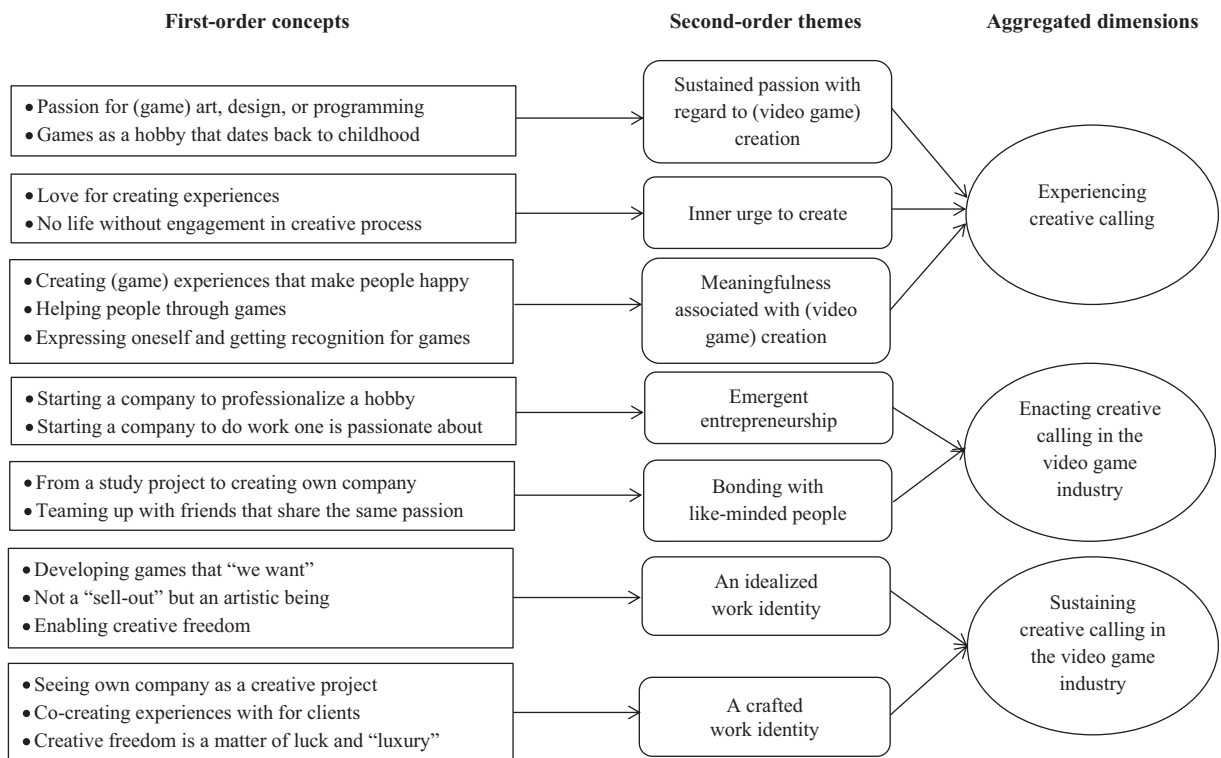


Fig. 1. Data structure.

foundation of our narrative about how individuals experience, enact and sustain their calling in the context of less-established career structures and scarce resources.

Both authors of the paper had extensive knowledge of the literature on careers and calling as well as experience with qualitative data analysis. The lead author was the person primarily responsible for the data analysis. The second author actively engaged in the data analysis process at the stage where second-order themes and theoretical dimensions were developed to minimize any potential biases. We held several brainstorming sessions to determine the literature that could help to capture our emergent concepts and to discuss any disagreements. We followed the guidelines of Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure trustworthiness of the study. First, the lead author engaged in making notes/memos to capture her thoughts, ideas, and reflections on the data, which further assisted in the analysis. Second, we shared our emergent ideas with colleagues who were not involved in the study (i.e., peer debriefing) to see whether the ideas make sense.

3. Findings

Our study revealed that the way the game company founders talk about the meanings they attached to their work and to their involvement in the video game industry suggested that they had a creative calling, which they describe broadly as being about a creative (video game) development process rather than about a particular occupation or profession. They engaged in emergent entrepreneurship and bonded with like-minded people to create a space for themselves to move from developing games and engaging in creative experiences as a hobby to doing both within the framework of their own companies, thus enacting their creative calling in the video game industry. While the game company founders shared similar experiences related to the enactment of their calling, how they tried to sustain this creative calling enactment differed. Some tended to anchor their creative calling enactment in the video game industry in an idealized work identity, while others tended to anchor it in a crafted work identity. Below, we describe how the interviewed game company founders experienced, enacted and tried to sustain their creative calling in the video game industry.

3.1. Experiencing creative calling

Our data suggest that the way the game company founders make sense of their work stories and describe their experiences associated with making (video)games resembles a calling. For example, the following founder explains what works means to him by specifically referring to ‘calling’: “How I feel about my work? It is a calling basically”. Although the other interviewees did not explicitly refer to a ‘calling’, they did explain why they have a calling rather than a career or a job orientation to their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), talking about the importance and the meanings they attached to their engagement in the video game industry. These explanations suggested that the game company founders experienced their work as a calling.

Generalizing on the accounts provided by our interviewees, we observed the game company founders talking about having a creative calling, which we define as *an enduring, compelling, and meaningful urge to engage in creative work (i.e., creation of video games) that delivers the best possible and valuable experiences for other people*. This definition suggests a understanding of calling as being focused broadly on a creative process being realized through (video)game development, which satisfied the game company founders' inner urge to create and to have a positive impact on gamers and the video game industry as a whole rather than on a specific occupation or profession. Thus, the game company founders' experiences of calling go beyond the boundaries of their ‘official’ occupation title (i.e., a game company founder) and/or the profession they studied for (i.e., a (game) designer). In this way, they reflect the Dutch video game industry as a context characterized by poorly established career structures and scarce resources in which individuals' engagement in creative process happens at the intersection of different occupations and professions, blurring the boundaries between them.

To understand the founders' experiences of calling, we distinguished the following themes that underlined the proposed definition of a creative calling – a *sustained passion with regard to (video game) creation, an inner urge to create, and meaningfulness associated with (video game) creation* – on which we elaborate below.

3.1.1. Sustained passion with regard to (video game) creation

Creation of a video game incorporates different activities related to such domains as art, design and technology and thus combines the efforts of individuals with skills in these domains who might experience passion in one or several of these domains. The interviewed game founders emphasized that they work in the video game industry because they have passion for designing games or for the technological or artistic aspects that comprise the creative process of video game creation. In this way, the founders differed in terms of the importance that they placed on different domains of video game development. The domain that they were most passionate about was also connected to the type of education they had pursued (e.g., art school or computer science). Almost all of the game company founders indicated that their love for playing and making (video)games started in their early childhood, suggesting that they have been sustaining their love for games and the associated passion throughout their lives. For example, this founder explained when and how his passion for games started:

In the very beginning, when I was six, I got a video pack, the first Phillips consul. I got it for my birthday. ... At the moment that I turned it on, then I saw the graphics ... very primitive, I was so fascinated that you could play bowling on your TV ... and that started the passion I have for video games and for information technology. As I became older, the more ... it grew... the bigger it became. I think the passion for games for me is unlimited. I cannot think of any other multimedia medium that is so compelling as games (Founder 7, GDS_D).

Since the founders pursued their passion throughout their lives, they planned to continue pursuing it until their retirement. For example, one founder explained how he did not see himself stopping game development even after retirement:

If I could, I would stay here [in the video game industry] until I retire. I would stay working on games, working on game development and just working on making the industry a better place until I die ... essentially, this is not even retirement. I would still probably be in games even after I retire. I just cannot stop. I know that I could not do it when I was young, and until today I have not stopped thinking about games, game development and the whole gaming industry on the gaming basis (Founder 14, GDS_J).

3.1.2. Inner urge to create

The sense of love and passion in relation to games was tied to the inner urge that the game company founders had to be creative, to creatively solve problems and to be able to create. The interviewed game company founders suggested that they could not imagine a life without engagement in creative work; they could not see themselves ceasing to engage in creative work; and they felt “compelled to create things”. The founders, however, differed in whether making games was just a means to satisfy this urge or whether it was an end in itself, viewed as the ultimate way to satisfy the creative urge. In this way, the creative urge did not necessarily have to be coupled to a particular role identity (e.g., a game designer, etc.). For instance, one of the game company founders explained that he felt a compelling desire to create:

This [being creative] is just something that I basically need to do. If we think about what creativity is and who creative people are – is a creative person somebody who is just really good in creating something or needs to create something even if it is crap? You know, I tend to believe more in the sort of second definition, where I think I am very creative person. ... I am constantly compelled to create things. I just get bored if I do not create stuff (Founder 15, GDS_K).

3.1.3. Meaningfulness associated with (video game) creation

The game company founders experienced engagement in creative work or in the creation of games as an extremely meaningful and purposeful process. In line with prior research, experiences of work meaningfulness could be focused on the self (i.e., concerned with fulfillment of personal needs, motivations and desires) or on others (i.e., concerned with making an impact and a difference in the life of others) (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). The two focuses should be seen as the poles of a single continuum that need to be present to fully experience meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). The interviewed game company founders shared that the meaningfulness they experienced from engaging in creative process was a result of the focus on both the self and others, but they emphasized one pole of this meaningfulness continuum more intensively.

Some of the game company founders experienced their creative process engagement as meaningful when they could express themselves and receive recognition for the games they had created (their focus on the self was greater than that on others). As an illustration, one of the founders shared the significance of engaging in game development for him:

I am very passionate about making games, for instance, about pursuing this project regardless of whether it generates a commercially viable product. [...] I like that people like my work. I can get pretty upset when people do not like my work ... I like it when people say “That is awesome. I had such a fun time”. ... And there is another thing with this particular project. I am very interested in the topic and making a game about that [about this event] specifically (Founder 4, GDS_B).

In turn, the majority of the game company founders experienced creative process as meaningful because they could create experiences that entertain other people, make them happy through games and contribute to the development of the video game industry (their focus on others is greater than that on the self). In addition to the entertainment value of games, these founders viewed games as a tool to help people learn, communicate, advance in their lives and feel empowered. For example, one founder explained that his reason for developing games was to benefit people rather than to benefit himself:

As you are making games, you are trying to make people enjoy themselves. At least, this is the goal.... I really want to excite people. [...] I have a creative vision of how to make people happy with a game. [...] You have the indie [independent developers] scene, which is very personally focused. I really do not like that because for me, it puts the focus away from games and on people who make games. ... So I do not necessarily seek acknowledgment or a creative legacy. I am very aware of my tiny role in the universe. ... My main goal is to make people happy. I can do it with games I think entertainment is very important. [...] So, I really like what I am doing, and I think it is important (Founder 1, GDS_A).

3.2. Enacting creative calling in the video game industry

The underdeveloped nature of the Dutch video game industry, which results in the absence of well-established career structures and the limited availability of job opportunities, was also explicitly mentioned by several of the interviewed game company founders. For example, one of the interviewees explained that he did not truly see making games as a ‘serious’ career first: “I worked with some of my friends, who were also very interested in creating game ideas. [...] But I did not really see it from a career perspective at that time. [...] I [thought that I] was going to do something serious” (Founder 3_GDS_A). Another founder of a more mature game company described the state of the video game industry when he and his fellow founders graduated: “When we graduated, there was no game industry in Holland. There were one or two companies. There was no funding, there were no app stores, no way except

making something and selling it to a publisher that was in the USA or Germany or in the UK, but not in Holland” (Founder 22_ SGSP).

In such circumstances, the game company founders found themselves needing to self-design an environment in which they could develop video games professionally, thereby creating this career path themselves. Our data analysis revealed that the enactment of a creating calling by the interviewed game company founders was characterized by *emergent entrepreneurship* and *bonding with like-minded people*.

3.2.1. Emergent entrepreneurship

To enact their creative calling in the video game industry, the founders embarked on an entrepreneurial journey. The majority of the interviewed founders did not start their company because they wanted to be an entrepreneur but rather because it was the only way for them to do what they love (i.e., making video games) professionally. This was manifested in the game company founders viewing their decision to start a company as an “administrative matter” that enabled them to professionalize their hobby. These instances reflect a ‘push’ motivation to engage in entrepreneurship (Amit & Muller, 1995). For instance, this founder explained how he started his company:

I did not make a decision “Ok. What I am going to do with my life? Ok. ... I am going to found a company”. This sort of grew out of a hobby ... It [starting a company] was more like an administrative thing that I needed to be a business in order to arrange taxes (Founder 4, GDS_B).

3.2.2. Bonding with like-minded people

With the exception of a couple of the game company founders, venture creation was also triggered by the emergent opportunity to work with like-minded people on a game project as part of their education. Subsequently trying to commercialize on their developed game project, the interviewed game company founders started their companies, hoping for success. Therefore, they often started their game companies when they were still students, feeling that they had “nothing to lose” and that they were “already accustomed to living on a small amount of money”. For example, this founder explained how they teamed up with fellow classmates to start a company:

Three of us were actually studying interaction design ..., where we did a game project as the final project for school ... for an outside client. The project was very nice, so we thought “why not to do this [game development] after we are done with school and start a company [to see] if we can make it work?” (Founder 23, SGS_P).

Bonding with like-minded people was especially important for founders who felt that they could not have started a company on their own. They did not see themselves as capable of taking on such a responsibility and becoming a “business person”, which they observed as being required to start a company. For instance, this founder explained why he could not have started a company on his own:

I would never have started my own company; some people can ... you and me, for me, it is too much business stuff. ... It was a really hard decision to be responsible as well for the whole company (Founder 10, GDS_G).

3.3. Sustaining creative calling enactment in the video game industry

Sustaining the creative calling enactment in the video game industry was seen by the interviewed game company founders as a very challenging process. This difficulty was often attributed to the nature of the video game business as being extremely “rough”, “dangerous”, “competitive”, “rapidly developing”, “saturated” and “highly risky”. For instance, one of the game company founders described the industry in the following way: “It [the industry] is crowded. It is not easy money, you know... the simple fact is 99% of all the people just do not make it or ... they hardly survive. [...] It is a really rough market. It is just ... if you survive in here, it is really an accomplishment” (Founder 12, GDS_H).

Indeed, due to harshness of the video game industry, all of the interviewed game company founders recognized that the enactment of their creative calling conflicts with accompanying a need to account for the business aspect of game development (i.e., needs of the market). This tension or struggle resonates with the tension between art for the art's sake versus the commercialization of art, which is so characteristic of creative industries (Caves, 2000; Defillippi, Grabher, & Jones, 2007). All the interviewed game company founders tried their best to overcome the challenges associated with the enactment of their creative calling in the video game industry and thereby to sustain it as long as possible, yet they have approached this process in different ways. In particular, we observed that the interviewed game company founders tried to sustain their creative calling by anchoring its enactment in the video game industry to either an *idealized work identity* or a *crafted work identity*.

Drawing on the conceptualization of Cardador and Caza (2012), work identity was reflected in how the game company founders construed who they are at work, rather than in the amateur enactment of creative calling in the video game industry. *Idealized work identity* revolved around the myth of devotion to art, which is associated with the idealization of the artist as an ideal work model and the commercialization of art being seen as selling out (Bain, 2005; Ross, 2003). In contrast, the *crafted work identity* revolved around engagement in identity work to better suit the coveted game company founder role (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Below, we discuss how the game company founders anchor their calling enactment in each of these work identities.

3.3.1. An idealized work identity anchor

The game company founders who anchored their creative calling enactment in an idealized work identity emphasized the importance of being able to work as autonomous artists with freedom to create and develop (video)games that they are passionate about and that are unique and market independent. In this way, the meanings that they attached to themselves at work resembled what Bain (2005, p. 42) called a ‘myth of devotion to art’, which is embodied in a romanticized artistic ideal that is shared by the members of a creative labor occupation. Idealizing one’s work in this way enabled the game company founders to find an identity anchor for their creative calling enactment in the video game industry. Drawing further on Bain’s work (2005), our findings show that by enacting creative calling that is anchored in the idealized work identity, the game company founders reinforced their occupational authenticity and sense of belonging to the valued occupational group of artistically minded creatives who focus on experimentation and creative expression. For example, this founder explained the clear distinction that existed between artistic and commercial creative work:

I do not see myself as a person who would make six small games for the iPhone and then just as a commercial product. That really goes against ... who I am, basically. [...] It is like a debate between sort of more artistic-oriented game studios and the more, I would say, professional, commercial-oriented studios who are making games to make money and ... are really focused on getting the most cash or the most effective way of earning money from it. Whereas the more artistic-oriented or those who view making a game more from an artistic-oriented perspective ... you see really a lot of these projects fail actually because they are not commercially viable but ... people who make them are really passionate. And I think that I count myself in that category rather than the other (Founder 4, GDS_B).

When the creative calling enactment was anchored in such an idealized view of themselves, the game company founders tended to preserve this ideal against all odds while trying to overcome the challenges associated with it. It was common among these game company founders to take on so-called work for hire (WFH) (i.e., doing work for clients). In this way, they sacrificed some of their creative time to the cause of sustaining their creative calling enactment in the video game industry, yet they saw it only as a “necessity” and tried to minimize it when possible. There were also instances of the game company founders applying for grants, taking loans, and searching for publishers to achieve a sustainable creative calling enactment. For instance, this game company founder explained how he tried to sustain his creative calling enactment while referring to an artistic ideal of work:

We started doing a lot of WFH stuff like websites, applications, and other non-game-related stuff so that we could fund the work that we wanted to do, which was in this case the game we are currently working on. We needed to get some money to pay our rent and our office, have food and things like that. ... Ultimately, if we could have dropped it [WFH] or at least doing [it] maybe like 10 or 20%, it would have been ideal for us. But it is not really realistic for a lot of studios. ... So, I think WFH is also a necessity for a lot of startups, basically (Founder 15, GDS_K).

3.3.2. A crafted work identity anchor

These game company founders anchored their creative calling enactment in a crafted work identity that resulted from the founders crafting and adapting an earlier idealized view of themselves to succeed in the video game industry. This was manifested in the game company founders viewing the development of their companies, as well as their involvement in entrepreneurship, as a potential additional way to enable a sustained creative calling enactment. In this way, they were crafting their ideal creative work identities into hybrid work identities that included creative work and entrepreneurship. For example, one of the game company founders explained how he transitioned to being creative when managing his company:

Although I love games, I do not necessarily have to create games, so that is also a transition I went through. Earlier, it really used to be my original intent to create games, which I still really like, but now I see the company itself as a project ... so that is also a way to express my creativity, so that is also fine (Founder 12, GDS_H).

These game company founders also realized that they could enact their creative calling in the video game industry within the framework of doing work for clients. Interestingly, they often distinguished it from the term ‘WFH’, seeing the work they did as not being rigidly set by a client but as allowing autonomy in the creative process, thus emphasizing the co-creation with clients in the process. For example, one of the game company founders described how working for clients could also satisfy his creative urge:

If you use this creativity applied to a very specific constraint like a design for client or a specific question for a client, that creativity can be used and shaped by the persons themselves to help that client to answer that question, to fix their problem. So basically, it is ... not to let the creativity run wild but to try to help people pick the right directions, basically. That is not always easy, because like I said, I would like to draw monsters all day, but sometimes I have to draw a human being who works for a bank. It is very much less exciting but you still need to make the best out of it. That is where the creativity comes in. (Founder 23, SGS_P).

What is interesting is that these founders legitimized their decision to craft their identity in their stories by indicating that they observed it as a solution to the limited possibility of making a living with artistic work in the Dutch video game industry. For them, success in this endeavor depended very much on luck (e.g., the developed (video)game is commercially successful, etc.) and the availability of resources (e.g., the game is produced with a game publisher, financial support is acquired, etc.). Several of the founders explicitly referred to having creative freedom when enacting their creative calling in the video game industry as a “luxury” and thus not available to everyone. For example, one of the game company founders explained the difficulty of having creative freedom while

earning money:

Being able to be creative and stuff like that is a luxury, it is something in this world I believe you have to earn for yourself, you have to earn some space where you can do experiments and create stuff ... but for most people ... the only place to do that is at home, in their room, you know? ... Just a few of us are able to make art and make a living from it... and to do whatever they want to because they are very lucky or they won the lottery or created something people really want to buy ... but for every successful autonomous artist, there are maybe tens of thousands who are not. And you have to realize this if you want to build a company (Founder 9, GDS_F).

We now step back from the description of our empirical findings to discuss them in light of prior research and the implications they provide for theory and practice.

4. Discussion

Drawing on the qualitative data gathered from twenty-four founders of companies in the Dutch video game industry, we sought to contribute to a better understanding of how individuals experience, enact and sustain their calling in contexts where career structures are less established and resources are limited. Below, we address each of the findings in light of the existing literature, discuss their theoretical and practical implications as well as the limitations of our study and suggestions for future research directions.

First, our findings revealed that the interviewed game company founders experienced a creative calling that was broadly focused on the process of creative work and game development rather than on a particular occupation or profession. By suggesting that the understanding of calling can go beyond the boundaries of a certain occupation or profession, these findings point to the need for a broadly defined understanding of calling in the context of less-developed career structures and limited resources. The possibility of a calling being more 'flexible' in how it is understood finds some support in the conceptual studies of [Berkelaar and Buzzanell \(2015\)](#) and [Elangovan et al. \(2010\)](#), yet our study is among the first to show that this understanding of calling can be manifested in the context of 'weak' career situations ([Weick, 1996](#); [Weick & Berlinger, 1989](#)), i.e., the environment of the Dutch game industry. Our study thus challenges the established understanding of calling as referring exclusively to a particular occupation or profession (e.g., [Bunderson & Thompson, 2009](#); [Dik & Duffy, 2009](#); [Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011](#)). Exploring whether one's calling is focused on engaging in a meaningful process may also be relevant for individuals in other emergent professions (i.e., vloggers, stand-up comedians, etc.), and new ways of working (i.e., digital nomadism, etc.) is an important future research avenue. This knowledge would help broaden the applicability of the calling concept to types of work that may not be directly 'recognized' as something an individual can be called to do.

Second, our findings show that enacting a calling in the context characterized by poorly developed career structures and scarce resources, such as the Dutch video game industry, is a challenging path to undertake. Indeed, the interviewed game company founders realized that they needed to engage in entrepreneurship to create a space in which they could move from developing games as a hobby to developing them professionally, and many of them started companies seeing it as the only way to enact their creative calling in the video game industry. In so doing, they engaged in bonding with like-minded people, further emphasizing the importance of having a community that can support individuals in their calling enactment. Thus, our findings resonate with the idea of individual and collective career improvisation ([Weick, 1996](#); [Weick & Berlinger, 1989](#)), which individuals need to engage in to make a living from what they love and to enact their calling. Research in creative industries shows that entrepreneurship is used by many creatives to professionalize a labor of love (e.g., [Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006](#); [Lingo & Tepper, 2013](#)). For example, in her study, [Demetry \(2017\)](#) shows how chefs engage in starting pop-up restaurants and in this way professionalize their hobby. Our study suggests that engaging in entrepreneurship and bonding with like-minded people are important ways to enable calling enactment in the context of less-established career structures and limited resources. In this way, it extends research that studies the means of enacting or living out one's calling ([Berg et al., 2010](#); [Duffy & Autin, 2013](#); [Duffy et al., 2016](#)), which acknowledges this to be a very challenging process (e.g., [Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015](#); [Dobrow Riza & Heller, 2015](#)). Future research should explore which alternative strategies of career improvisation individuals can employ to enact their calling in 'weak' career situations and how collective career improvisation is manifested in other creative industries.

Third, our findings suggest that the game company founders tried to sustain their creative calling enactment in the video game industry by anchoring it in either an idealized or a crafted work identity. The first group of founders tied their creative calling enactment to an idealistic artistic way of being creative, making themselves dependent on luck and hope and taking on projects unrelated to games to satisfy their basic necessities. This represents a somewhat short-term approach to enacting one's calling because it suggests a more fixed, overidealized view of themselves at work, which makes the interviewed game company founders more vulnerable and less able to adapt to unexpected layoffs or challenges in the industry, impeding the sustaining of the calling enactment. Indeed, it appears that some of the game company founders have closed their companies, started new ones or are searching for alternative strategies for the calling enactment. These findings resonate with prior research showing that individuals with a calling could view their work identity as revolving around an idealized conceptualization, such as what it means to be paratrooper ([Thornborrow & Brown, 2009](#)), a pilot ([Fraher & Gabriel, 2014](#)) or a musician ([Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012](#)). In turn, this may create 'tunnel vision' with regard to one's calling enactment – seeing calling enactment as only possible within the particular occupation or profession.

The second group of founders anchored their creative calling pursuit in a work identity that was revised and adapted to meet the challenging nature of the video game industry, recognizing the importance of building sustainable companies to enable their calling enactment in the video game industry. These game company founders realized that being artists and having artistic freedom while

enacting their creative calling was a ‘luxury’; therefore, they took a more realistic and long-term perspective toward sustaining their creative calling enactment in the video game industry. However, this did not necessarily mean that they were highly commercially successful or outperforming other companies. However, they tried their best to build a company that could survive in the difficult video game industry. Thus, by crafting and revising the ideal meaning of oneself at work, individuals could see different ways through which their calling could be enacted, enabling a greater sustainability of their calling enactment. While crafting one's work identity, individuals could experiment with possible selves that would facilitate greater adaptation to the challenging reality of the video game industry (Ibarra, 1999). As prior research suggests, creative workers who manage to craft their artistic identities into the identity of a ‘bohemian entrepreneurs’ (i.e., combining a bohemian/artistic lifestyle with self-management (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2006)) or a ‘practical artist’ (i.e., combining artistic and business identities) (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010) are more successful at making a living while being creative. The benefits of enacting one's calling in such a flexible manner also resonates with research on the flexibility of interests, which suggests that individuals who are flexible in their interests are more likely to find multiple working environments and occupations that satisfy their interests (e.g., Darcy & Tracey, 2003).

Thus, our findings reveal that anchoring one's calling enactment in a work identity – an understanding of “who one is” at work – shapes how individuals try to sustain their calling enactment and the likelihood that they are successful in this endeavor. In this way, they align with Cardador and Caza (2012), who argued that work identity is an important factor that influences whether the calling pursuit is seen as healthy or unhealthy. The findings emphasize the importance of purposefully crafting one's work-related self-definition in response to a challenging working environment to sustain one's calling enactment on a longer-term basis and in a healthy manner in the context of less-established career structures and limited resources. By so doing, this work extends research that examines when calling benefits and/or challenges one's career development (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Cardador & Caza, 2012; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Lysova et al., 2018).

Future research should explore which identity work processes could enable individuals to craft their idealized work identities. This seems to be a particularly valuable future research direction for scholars studying creative industries given the prominent idealistic desire of creatives to exclusively do “art for art's sake” to serve their artistic nature (Caves, 2000). Moreover, scholars should explore factors that can prevent individuals from shifting their focus from an idealized to a crafter work identity anchor. For example, some of the interviewees sensed that focusing on building a sustainable game company could have been perceived by the video game industry community as becoming too commercial, ruining their artistic-oriented image. While this was outside the focus of this current study, scholars could consider how such “community pressure” could facilitate an unhealthy calling pursuit.

4.1. Limitations and future research directions

We acknowledge that our study has several limitations that should be addressed by future research. First, the data for this study were collected as part of a larger project aimed at understanding how game companies operate and innovate in the Dutch video game industry. After some pilot interviews for the project, we observed that when talking about innovative game development, the founders often referred to the significance and meaning that they attached to their engagement in game development and to their affinity with different domains of game development. The follow-up data collection – which was the basis for this paper – focused on uncovering these experiences, which pointed toward a calling as an important concept to capture the game company founders' experiences. Because these important insights came through the data collection and analysis process, our interview protocol was designed to focus broadly on the meanings that the game company founders attached to their work and game development without forcing the interviewees to talk about their calling. Although this was in line with prior research in which respondents were not directly asked about their calling (e.g., Berg et al., 2010), by so doing, we lack a deep understanding of the emergence of creative calling and only capture how it is experienced by the founders. Future research should explore how calling emerges and whether the different paths toward its emergence may shape how it is experienced, enacted, and sustained.

Second, given the nature of our data, we did not account for the potentially dynamic nature of calling in our study or for the potential differences in its magnitude (a continuum from a weak to a strong calling). We acknowledge this is a limitation because it is suggested that calling develops over time and is not binary in nature (i.e., having or not having a calling) (Dobrow, 2013). Thus, future research should consider longitudinal designs for exploring how calling is experienced, enacted, and sustained in challenging contexts.

Third, given our focus on experiences of calling and its enactment as a career in the video game industry, we did not account for contextual factors that might have shaped how calling is experienced and enacted. For instance, we interviewed the founders who represented game development studios and applied game studios who differed in the way of working as well as in their company tenure. The differences in the missions attached to game development by the two types of companies (making beautiful games versus making games to solve societal problems) might have shaped the meaningfulness that the game company founders experienced in the creative process engagement. Furthermore, game companies that existed for a longer period of time might have built expertise in surviving in the difficult video game industry market. Scholars should examine how organizational contextual factors (age, size and time of one's venture) shape the experiences and enactment of calling.

Fourth, we currently only focused on how the game company founders themselves describe the meanings they attach to their work. However, because companies often have more than one founder, as in some of our interviewed companies, it could be interesting to explore how founders describe each other's calling experiences and how these experiences are shaped by the founders continuous interactions. For example, research on entrepreneurial passion suggests that founder teams could have a collective passion that represents the combined entrepreneurial passion of each team member, including potential differences in the level of these individual's passions (Drnovsek, Cardon, & Murnieks, 2009). We could speculate and suggest that the same might hold for a calling,

suggesting the presence of a collective calling. Future research should further examine calling within the framework of founder teams to explore the possibilities of how differences in each founder's calling shape and contribute to the emergence of a collective calling.

4.2. Practical implications

Our study provides valuable practical suggestions for individuals trying to enact their calling via entrepreneurship in less-structured career environments as well as for career counselors and career development professionals. In particular, it suggests that it is important for individuals to take a more realistic perspective when it comes to searching for opportunities to enact one's calling. In the case of starting a venture to enact one's calling, individuals need to also develop and learn entrepreneurial skills to help them professionalize the way in which they enact their calling and thus to better maneuver in challenging industry contexts. Taking a more realistic approach to enacting one's calling seems especially relevant for today's generation of individuals who grew up with a “do what you love” work mantra (Tokumitsu, 2014) and feel that they can have any career they want, regardless of their talent or competencies (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Twenge, 2006). Career counselors and career development professionals could help these individuals to craft their idealized work identity into the one that better fits reality and to be more adaptable in the way they enact their calling. In particular, career counselors could take a dynamic approach that encourages individuals to engage in imaginative thinking and explore possible selves (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006), as this can increase their active exploration behaviors and career adaptability (Savickas et al., 2009). In this way, individuals could see more possibilities for their calling enactment, making it more sustainable and less vulnerable to challenges and changing circumstances in the work environment.

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